

Confucius: His Life, Times, and Legacy

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A portrait of Confucius by the Ming dynasty artist Qiu Ying (ca. 1494–1552). Source: *Wikipedia* at <https://tinyurl.com/ybqxypee>.

This module was designed for a sixth-grade global cultures class, although it could be implemented in history or culture classes ranging from sixth to ninth grade. It is designed to teach Tennessee state social studies standards 6.34—"Identify the political and cultural problems prevalent in the time of Confucius and how the philosophy of Confucianism and *The Analects* emphasized the concepts of kinship, order, and hierarchy to address these problems," and 6.36—"Explain how the implementation of the philosophy of Confucianism led to the political success and longevity of the Han dynasty." The module also aligns with Tennessee social studies practices standards.

The content and pedagogical strategies for the module are applicable for teachers in middle schools throughout the nation whose curricula include Confucius and early Chinese history. The module may be applicable for high school teachers as well.

Estimated module length: Approximately three to five forty-five-minute class periods. If students have not completed background reading, it could be assigned as homework on the evening before Class No.1 or between Class Nos.1 and 2.

Overview

Confucius (551–479 BCE), a scholar and teacher, lived in a chaotic and violent time in China. He wished to see peace and harmony restored and a return to order. Confucius's objective of social and political harmony for China rested on three major foundations: self-cultivation, respect for rituals and traditions, and the importance of human relationships. His teachings, (*Analects*), collected and recorded by adherents after his death, were foundational for traditional Chinese formal and informal education, and continue to influence contemporary Chinese and East Asian cultures. Traditional Confucianism stressed the importance of five human relationships in particular: parent–child, husband–wife, older sibling–younger sibling, friend–friend, and ruler–subject. Confucius viewed almost all human relationships as hierarchical and reciprocal. Educational attainment was particularly valued. Shihuangdi (259–210 BCE), the first emperor of China's initial dynasty, the Qin, and his legalist advisers targeted Confucian scholars and books in an effort to crush opposition. Several hundred years after his death, Confucius's teachings rose to prominence under Emperor Wudi during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). Confucianism laid the groundwork for a central government civil service and, though not the only Chinese belief system, profoundly emphasized Chinese perceptions of ethical and unethical behavior.

Objectives

Students will:

Identify how culture and prominent actors in a given culture shape societal beliefs and laws.

Describe the ways in which Confucian ideas were used during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) to help create order and guide individual behavior.

Understand how Confucianism spread to and influenced other East Asian cultures.

Recognize Confucian influences on young Chinese and other East Asians in the twenty-first century.

Prerequisite knowledge

This module was developed for incorporation into a broader instructional segment where students learn about the geography and culture of Asia, both past and present. The assumption is that students will have no prior knowledge of Confucius or his historical and contemporary impact. It is assumed that students can define the term “culture” and identify examples of cultural beliefs or practices found in texts, images, and primary sources (a term it is assumed they can also define). Students will also already know the five themes of geography (location, place, region, movement, and human–environment interaction).

Module introduction

The handout for this module appears in both the module narrative at the end of the module for the convenience of teachers wishing to use all or part of these digital materials.

Class No. 1

Estimated time: ten to thirty minutes

Depending of the number of prompts chosen and the size of your class, the chalk talk time should be ten to thirty minutes.

First, create a context for learning about Confucius through employing a chalk talk. A chalk talk is a silent way for students to engage in thoughtful discussion at any point of a learning experience. Typically, a question, statement, or visual is posted either on chart paper or on a digital collaborative space such as Padlet or Google Docs. Have students examine the prompt and write down what they are thinking or wondering about, circle interesting ideas, write questions, add a comment to someone else's comment, and draw lines connecting similar ideas. Without mentioning Confucius or Confucianism, have students consider some or all of the following Confucian-inspired prompts:

Children have an obligation to support and care for their parents.

How can you measure success?

Moral integrity is more important than fame, power, and wealth.

Ancient teachings influence contemporary beliefs and behaviors.

Can a belief system help a society? Why or why not?

Education and life-long learning are important to the welfare of individuals and society as a whole.

It is critical that the ruler of a country possess virtue and compassion.

Order and harmony are essential.

The past is a reservoir of truth.

There is beauty in precision.

Music has the power to transform and improve an individual.

If people want to live in peace and prosperity today, they must look far back into the past for inspiration.

Author's notes on student reactions

Students needed some framing or teacher participation in the chalk talk to think deeply and avoid repetition and/or impulsive and superficial comments. For example, in response to "Education and life-long learning are important to the welfare of individuals and society as a whole," students initially focused on the idea that education leads to a "good job," which is needed to "support your

family.” With some guidance, they were able to add “Yes, we need a foundation” and “Curiosity and life-long learning lead to being productive problem-solvers.” All students agreed that “Integrity is more important than fame, power, and wealth” and claimed they “would rather be trusted and respected than famous and stuff” and noted that “You can be famous and wealthy but have no common sense or integrity.” The timing of the chalk talk had an impact on the response to “Children have an obligation to support and care for their parents.” Having just finished a novel about an eleven-year-old Iranian immigrant to the United States in 1979, *It Ain’t So Awful, Falafel* by Firoozeh Dumas—who had to translate for both her parents, explain American humor to them, and learn about norms and traditions on her own—they were focused on the idea that “Parents need to take care of children, not the other way around” and “Yes, but that’s not their top priority” or “In some ways, but they need to be kids too.” After I added a comment about adult children and elderly parents to the list, there were some softer and supportive comments added.

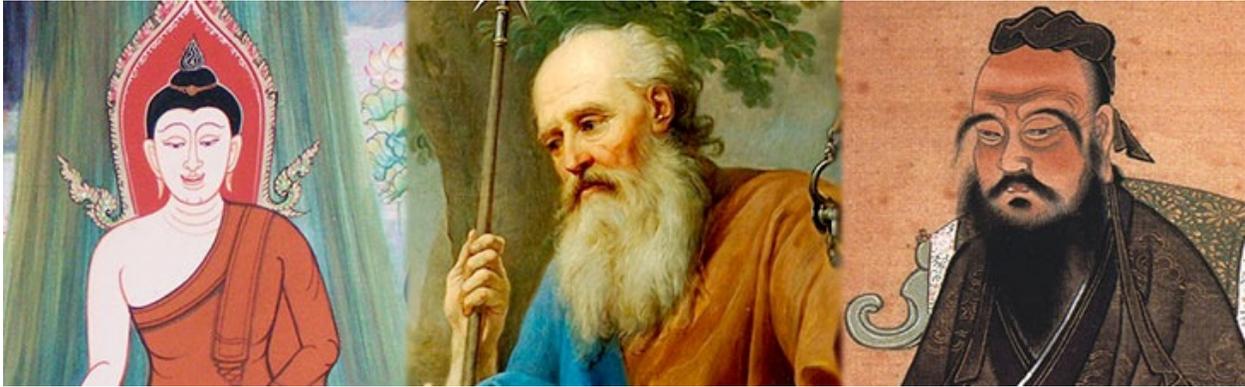
The “see, think, wonder” routine is flexible in that it can be completed as a whole-class exercise with the image projected and the teacher facilitating discussion, or it can be completed individually.

See, think, wonder is a thinking routine designed to help students make careful observations and develop their own ideas and interpretations based on what they see, and help stimulate curiosity about a topic. Have students look at a projected or printed photograph of the pediment over the east entrance to the Supreme Court of the United States the center of the exterior frieze featuring from left to right, Confucius, Moses, and Solon. Students will make note of what they see, what they think about what they see, and what they now wonder after seeing this photograph. The teacher can guide them to notice small details, to address all individuals in the façade, and look for connections between the three. It is likely at this point students will have far more “sees” and “wonders” than “thinks.”



The east pediment of the Supreme Court. Source: *DC Tour Guide Online* at <http://dctourguideonline.com/supreme-court-the-guardian-of-liberty/>. © 2018 Monumental Thoughts.

Introduction to Confucius and his early life



Buddha, Socrates, and Confucius. Source: “Genius of the Ancient World” on *Open Learn* at <https://tinyurl.com/y88lmsy3>.

View the *BBC* program “[Genius of the Ancient World, Episode 3: Confucius](#)” to eleven minutes, thirty seconds. In this segment, the narrator explains her goals in traveling through Asia to investigate the ideas of Buddha, Socrates, and Confucius. These eleven and a half minutes describe the family situation and early life of Kong Fuzi, or (English translation) Confucius, as well as background about the time period of Chinese history into which he was born.

Close by distributing the handout [Confucian Teachings, The Law, and Education](#). With partners, students will read short excerpts to identify and discuss the influence of cultural values based on Confucian teachings. Have them start by completing the warmup and listing their own family rules or norms for the behavior of children, and the relationship between parent and child.

Author’s notes on student reactions

Many students asked for more space to write about the rules in their family in regards to interactions between children and adults. There was a wide variety of responses to that question, including “We learned not to talk back to adults or be rude to them” and “Say yes, ma’am and no, ma’am. I was taught directly about these things because I am the oldest child.” Other students wrote about unspoken rules: “I should be polite. I am allowed to disagree and give my opinion too.” The majority of them had never thought about the way their parents interact with their grandparents and, upon reflection, observed, “My parents don’t seem to follow any rules when interacting with elderly family members” and “They are nice but always speak their mind” and “Hmm. Sometimes my mom yells at my grandfather, but I am not allowed to yell at her.” Family expectations related to education included “Do your best,” “School comes first,” “Be proud if you tried your hardest,” “Have a good attitude about it,” and “Get good grades and do your homework.”

Class No. 2: Continue Confucian teachings and law and education

Estimated time: ten to thirty minutes

Having completed the warmup in the previous class period, students begin the second class by reading short excerpts to look for and discuss the influence of cultural values based on Confucian teachings.

As they read, they will complete a 4As protocol using the chart in the handout. This protocol engages students with the text as they identify assumptions the author of the text holds, aspects of the text with which they agree, parts they want to argue with, and parts that are aspirational. There is also an opportunity for an extension activity or a homework assignment for students to interview their parents or examine the rules or handbook of their school.

Author's note on student reactions

When students worked with the *Three Character Classic*, they made connections to the novel *Ties That Bind Ties That Break*, a young adult novel about a girl in pre-World War II China who rebels against foot-binding, which they had just finished reading in language arts class. Although the practice of foot-binding did not become popular until almost 1,500 years after the death of Confucius and scholars debate whether neo-Confucians supported the practice, our girls' school environment likely shaped their reactions to the advice in the *Three Character Classic* as well. They agreed with the statements about the importance of learning but had strong objections to the fact that "Everything is *he*" and that women were not included. Some identified "Men at their birth are naturally good" as an assumption or something they would argue with. They found little to aspire to, again because of the use of "he" and "men."

In retrospect, when I teach the module again, it is likely that I'll get similar reactions, teaching in a girls' school, but will view them as an opportunity to introduce students to a critical component of historical literacy, avoiding one of the biggest impediments to historical literacy: presentism.

Extension activity No. 1: Minimizing presentism

British novelist L. P. Hartley in the opening line of his novel *The Go-Between* asserted, "The past is a foreign country: They do things differently there." This memorable line is true to an extensive but not complete extent when history instructors try to teach critical historical thinking to students. Cultural values and events in any given era profoundly affect the people who live in them. However, human nature that leads to both morally good and evil actions has evidentially remained unchanged since the beginning of recorded history. Keeping these two contradictory but true ideas constantly in mind is difficult but a necessity for anyone who wants to better understand the past. The task is hard enough for historians but particularly difficult for young people.

Consider this quotation by Hunter College education professor and historian Terrie Epstein: *Researchers consistently have found that young people possess a limited understanding of historical actors' and groups' motivations and actions. When asked to explain why historical actors or groups believed or behaved as they did, students describe people in the past as less intelligent than people today, or even "stupid." Young people also rely on presentism, that is, they project themselves into a historical period, recognizing that circumstances were different than they are now, but responding to*

a specific situation from a contemporary standpoint. Students also tend to be very judgmental of historical actors, critically asking, for example, why enslaved people "didn't just run away" or how people "voted for a crook like Nixon."

Revisit the question of Confucius and dominant attitudes toward women in ancient and medieval China. It is imperative for history teachers to help young people not simply apply their present values to the past. This does not mean that past values we consider “racist” or “sexist” today should be condoned, but careful consideration of the totality of contributions of Confucius, Aristotle, or Thomas Jefferson to human progress must be evaluated through a more comprehensive manner than simply what is considered acceptable and unacceptable in the present. Engaging in this kind of exercise when studying Confucius, or any number of historical actors, with students will often lead to profound classroom discussions.

View the *BBC* program “[Genius of the Ancient World, Episode 3: Confucius.](#)” Start at twenty-eight minutes, forty-three seconds and view until thirty-seven minutes, twelve seconds. This segment describes Confucius’s observations of families, their organization, and the ways authority, obedience, and morality in a family could be applied to a different context.

Tracking our thinking

Estimated time: Ongoing, five minutes or less each time

Students will start a connect–extend–challenge thinking routine to keep track of their thinking. Depending on your classroom space and student access to materials, this could be completed in a student notebook, on chart paper using sticky notes, or via an editable Google form. How are the ideas and information presented CONNECTED to what you already knew? What new ideas did you get that EXTENDED or pushed your thinking in new directions? What is still CHALLENGING or confusing for you to get your mind around? What questions, wonderings, or puzzles do you now have?

Begin viewing the *BBC* program “[Genius of the Ancient World, Episode 3: Confucius.](#)” Start at forty-one minutes, forty-seconds and stop at fifty-four minutes, forty-four seconds. In this segment, students will learn about the goals and efforts of Confucius and his students, the challenges they faced, and the end of his life. The segment continues to discuss the first Han emperor, incorporating Confucian ideas, challenges in the twentieth century, and a resurgence of Confucian teachings.

Students should add to their connect–extend–challenge notes before moving to the next activity.

Illustrating social structure and relationships

Estimated time: ninety minutes [more if students share their work])

Individually or in partners, students will first decide whether they would prefer to focus on the five relationships Confucius described or the social structure of Chinese society under the Han dynasty. Students will use the information from the *BBC* program and their text or another teacher-provided resource to read about, summarize, and illustrate their findings in an infographic or using sketch notes.

Closing

Revisit the see, think, wonder; the chalk talk; and the connect–extend–challenge.

Ask students, knowing what they now know, why Confucius might have been carved into the façade of the Supreme Court and what message it was intended to convey.

Revisit the standards in a discussion or assessment of your choice.

Identify the political and cultural problems prevalent in the time of Confucius and how the philosophy of Confucianism and *The Analects* emphasized the concepts of kinship, order, and hierarchy to address these problems.

Explain how the implementation of the philosophy of Confucianism led to the political success and longevity of the Han dynasty.

Extension activity No. 2: “Fighting the Stereotype: China Is a Confucian County”

Historically, Confucianism exerted a significant (perhaps the most significant) influence on Chinese culture, but other belief systems, notably Legalism, had enormous influence in Chinese society.

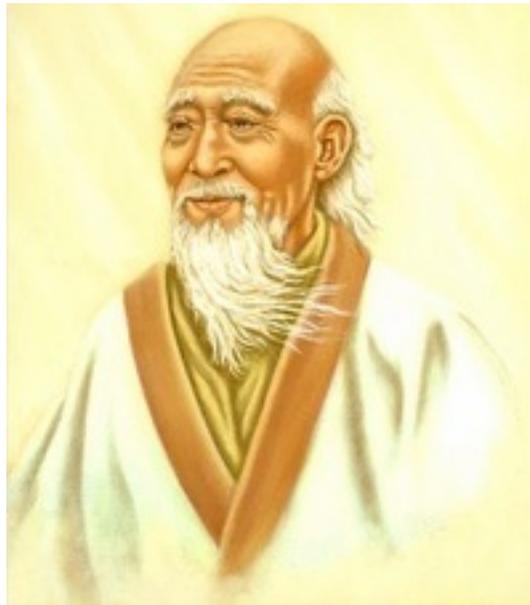
[Legalism](#) in ancient [China](#) was a philosophical belief that human beings are more inclined to do wrong than right because they are motivated entirely by self-interest. It was developed by the philosopher [Han](#) Feizi (c. 280–233 BCE)

From *Ancient History Encyclopedia* (2016):

The first Qin Emperor applied Legalist concepts to reward subjects for complying with government mandates and often harshly punish dissenters. Legalism to one extent or the other has influenced Chinese governments throughout history. Mainland Chinese central governments have never been democratic, although at the local and provincial (similar to U.S. states) levels today there is some allowance for political freedom, and since contemporary China has a significant amount of privately owned businesses and companies, economic freedom has greatly expanded. The Chinese national government though is ruled by one political party over which ordinary voters have little power..

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Daoism



Lao Tzu, founder of Daoism. Source: *GoodReads* at <https://tinyurl.com/y9v4d8fb>.

Dao (Tao) in Chinese means “the path or way.” Some of the ideas that became part of Daoism are probably even older than those of Confucius. Daoists fundamentally criticize Confucius for trying and thinking too hard about human affairs.

The basic idea of the Daoists was to enable people to realize that, since human life is really only a small part of a larger process of nature, the only human actions which ultimately make sense are those which are in accord with the flow of Nature — the Dao or the Way. Their sensitivity to the way of Nature prompted them to reject human ideas or standards which might lead to an overly assertive mode of behavior or too strong a commitment to the achievement of worldly goals. For Daoists, such unnatural assertiveness was the root cause of violence and aggression. While Confucians found moral reasons to counsel against violence and to urge rulers to govern by virtue rather than by force, many Daoists went even further and denounced violence as reflecting the ultimate ignorance of the Way of Nature.

Excerpt from [Asia for Educators: Introduction to Daoism](#)

Historically, Confucianism and Daoism both offered opposing views of the world and complemented each other, with Confucianism symbolizing the more masculine-influenced yang behaviors and Daoism symbolizing more feminine-influenced behaviors and perspectives. Chinese scholars/leaders were often influenced by Confucianism in their occupations and Daoism in their leisure time. Daoism exerted major influence on poetry, visual arts, and on the major historical import to China from India—Buddhism.

Teachers can have students compare and contrast Confucianism and Daoism by accessing Daoist primary sources at [Asia for Educators](#).

Contemporary China is also increasingly influenced by Christianity, particularly Protestantism. Christianity first appeared in China in the late sixteenth century, but the number of converts has soared since the 1976 death of Mao Zedong. Christians constitute approximately 5–6 percent of China’s population of 1.379 billion (2016). However, having students determine the actual number of Christians in China today will probably surprise them. Teachers who teach current events might want to assign the article at [The Council on Foreign Relations](#) on Christianity’s rapid rise in China.

References and resources

<https://youtu.be/TII9ucKT70o>: The BBC program “Genius of the Ancient World, Episode 3: Confucius” on YouTube is broken into segments for use in multiple class periods if time allows.

Robert Moore and James Rizor, “‘Confucian and Cool’: China’s Youth in Transition,” *Education About Asia* 13, no. 3 (2008): 30–37.

Jeffrey Richey, *Key Issues in Asian Studies: Confucius in East Asia* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Association for Asian Studies, 2013).

<https://goo.gl/ysHLjS>: See “Case 5: Fan Gui” (1821) on page 200 of R. Randle Edwards, “The Role of Case Precedent in the Qing Judicial Process as Reflected in Appellate Rulings,” in *Understanding China’s Legal System: Essays in Honor of Jerome A. Cohen*, ed. C. Stephen Hsu, (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

<https://www.supremecourt.gov/about/buildingfeatures.aspx>: This is a description of the façade of the Supreme Court.

<https://www.supremecourt.gov/about/eastpediment.pdf>: This link is an information sheet on the east pediment from the Office of the Curator of the Supreme Court of the United States.

https://www.nsrharmony.org/system/files/protocols/chalk_talk_0.pdf: This National School Reform faculty chalk talk is modified for classroom use.

https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/stateboardofeducation/documents/massivemeetingsfolder/meetingfiles4/7-28-17_IV_C_Social_Studies_Standards_Attachment_REVISED_7-28.pdf: These are Tennessee’s state social studies standards for K–12.

http://www.pz.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/AT_See%20Think%20Wonder.pdf: This site provides information on Harvard Graduate School of Education’s see, think, wonder exercise.

<http://www.mandarininstitute.org/node/120>: This is a link to Phebe Xu Gray of the Mandarin Institute's "Initiate a Fascinating Journey of Learning Chinese with the *Three Character Classic*."

<http://www.camcc.org/reading-group/adhoc/08022014>: *Cambridge Chinese Classics's* "The Three Character Classic" is available at this link.

"China and Its Neighbors" and "Confucianism and Imperial Law" in *Pearson My World Geography* (2010) are the texts used by my students.

Lensey Namioka, *Ties That Bind, Ties That Break* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2000).

<https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2012/preparing-history-teachers-to-develop-young-peoples-historical-thinking>: This article by Terrie Epstein is from *Perspectives on History*, "Preparing History Teachers to Develop Young People's Historic Thinking."

<https://www.ancient.eu/Legalism>

<https://www.ancient.eu/China>

<https://www.ancient.eu/Han>

These three pages are entries on Legalism, China, and Han from the *Ancient History Encyclopedia*.

http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china_1000bce_daoism.htm: This is an introduction to Daoism from *Asia for Educators*.

http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup/laozi_daodejing.pdf: These are Daoist primary sources from *Asia for Educators*.

<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/christianity-chinaL>: This is an article called "Christianity in China," from the *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 9, 2018.

Digital Materials for the Module “Confucius: His Life, Times, and Legacy”

“Confucian Teachings, the Law, and Education”

<https://www.utc.edu/asia-program/docs/modules1/king/confucusteachings.docx>